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SUBJECT: ROMA ASSOCIATION PRAISES LOCAL GOVERNMENT, STARTS
TO ORGANIZE

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: Edirne's Roma community enjoys a progressive relationship with the city's municipal authorities, which has helped bring tangible benefits to the community and led to increasing interest among Roma there in participating in party politics. According to Edirne Deputy Governor Aydin Akkor, Roma compose 30 percent of Edirne's population and Roma Association president Edinc Cekic looks forward to a time when the Roma might have a "gypsy soul in Parliament" to represent the needs of this minority. Roma associations throughout the country and Europe will meet in Ankara on International Roma Day (April 8) to plan future programs for development. End Summary.

Edirne: A Model for Government-Roma Relations

¶2. (SBU) During a March 4 visit to Edirne, on Turkey's far western border with Greece and Bulgaria, Deputy Governor Aydin Akkor told us Roma comprise 30 percent of Edirne's population and are provided significant social services, including health care. The Edirne Roma Culture Association praised the Edirne local government for its progressive relationship with its Roma minority. Association president Erdinc Cekic labeled it as "the best relationship with the government among all minority communities in Turkey" and a model for other cities in Europe. He contrasted the contentious urban renewal project in the Istanbul suburb of Sulukule (reftel) with a renovation project in a Roma neighborhood supported by the Edirne Governor's office on which the community was consulted at the outset. According to Cekic, the Governor's office said the project will occur after the election to avoid speculation that the project is a cynical bid to garner votes.

Getting the Ball Rolling: Political Representation

¶3. (SBU) In general, Cekic, noting that the Roma support any politician who supports equal rights, pointed out that the Roma feel more aligned with the AKP than CHP in Edirne. (Note: The AKP generally acts more as an advocate for the poor and disadvantaged in ways that other parties largely do not. End note.) This year, the Roma community put forth two individuals for candidacy in the municipal and provincial elections under the AKP banner. While ultimately neither was selected by the party, the step was a landmark move by a minority community that traditionally has remained removed from political rights and suffrage. According to Cekic, the Roma have ambitions to aim higher for the future. "We believe we have people who can contribute to solve the problems of the country," and the community would like to see a "gypsy soul in Parliament." Eventually, the Roma Culture

Association hopes to be able to inspire its youth through role models who have attained positions of power to inspire its youth. Cekic acknowledges that this will take the work of more than a generation, but pointed to the Civil Rights Movement and its ultimate achievement of electing an African American president in 2008 as inspiration.

¶4. (SBU) Overall, Cekic described the Roma situation in Turkey as 90 percent "good" though problems remain with access to public authorities for the Dom Roma in Diyarbakir and for two distinct Roma populations in the Black Sea industrial center of Zonguldak. He noted the association enjoys very good relations with Alevi organizations throughout Turkey, adding that the association's closest civil society relationship is with Pembe Hayat, a gay-lesbian-bisexual solidarity association.

Something New: Building Organizational Capacity

¶5. (SBU) Cekic emphasized the need for role models for the youth, asserting that talents who have excelled in the music and dance businesses no longer suffice. The association would like to show the next generation what it means to contribute to society. Toward this end, the association is working on improving its organizational capacity, admitting that "organizing is something very new for us." Cekic explained that the association's funding limitations have been compounded by the current economic crisis, though he acknowledged authorities would more likely provide funding for projects if the Roma were more organized. The association is currently working with the Open Society

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Institute and continues to have good relations with the Dutch and Swiss foreign missions in Turkey.

¶6. (SBU) Representatives of the Roma associations of Turkey will meet in Ankara April 8 - 10 with the Roma Rights Center of Hungary to commemorate International Roma Day and to begin an organized planning program with politicians and associations across the country. The Roma association in Istanbul did not celebrate Roma Day in 2008 in protest of the impending urban renewal project in Sulukule and their relocation to apartments outside of Istanbul.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: The Roma in Turkey do not traditionally support as a bloc any particular political party. However, their lifestyle would not predictably align them with the more socially conservative AKP. Nevertheless, AKP municipal leaders in Edirne recognize minority votes are worth soliciting. The Roma's economic impoverishment and benign history in Turkey allow government leaders to reach out and assist them far more easily than they do to other minority communities. Other communities are perceived, particularly by nationalist circles, as more of a threat to "Turkishness" or the integrity of the Turkish state. The efforts by Edirne's Roma community, and perhaps among Turkey's Romas at large, to organize themselves after years of ad hoc campaigns may make advocating for additional community support from the state more successful. End Comment.
Wiener